

Word Choice: Using Connotation and Denotation to Improve *Your* Writing

Every student learns about connotation and denotation in his or her English 101 and 102 classes. In those classes, you learn how to distinguish between the two as they appear in literature. You learn the concept or theory behind the terms. Learning to **apply** the concepts to *your* writing will quickly improve your writing style.

You are the *author* of your essay, and the word author implies you are somewhat of an *authority* on your subject. With authority comes responsibility. One of your most important responsibilities as a writer is **to be clear for your readers**—your professors! For your paper to be successful, you want to be sure your reader understands exactly what *you intended* for your words to mean. That’s where connotation and denotation can help.

Denotation is the word’s dictionary meaning. Simple enough, right? A word means what it means. Well, not entirely. Look up any word in the dictionary and there are several variations of the meaning offered.

Connotation is what the word implies or suggests. The connotation of a word conveys an additional layer of meaning for your reader. Conveying this additional layer of meaning helps insure your reader knows *exactly* what you intended when using the particular word.

Consider this example. Suppose your class has recently visited a greenhouse and you are asked to write a report explaining what you observed during the visit. You decide to focus on safety issues when using propane heaters to warm the greenhouse and a classmate is writing about an exotic flower. You both included the following sentences in your papers:

Classmate: When the flowers are in bloom, their *smell* fills the greenhouse.

You: When a gas line leaks, the *smell* fills the greenhouse.

There’s nothing “wrong” with either sentence, but by using the word *smell* and its denotative meaning, does the reader get an accurate idea of what you or your classmate intended? Now consider these revisions with connotation in mind:

Classmate: When the flowers are in bloom, their *fragrance* fills the greenhouse.

You: When a gas line leaks, the *stench* fills the greenhouse.

Smell, *fragrance*, and *stench* each have essentially the same denotation, they are all “odors,” but their connotations are quite different. In the revision, the reader has a much better idea of what the author really intended by the use of the word *smell*.

Applying the concepts of **Connotation** and **Denotation** will oftentimes improve other stylistic writing areas, such as

- Clarity
- Conciseness
- Active / Passive Voice (when applied to verbs)
- Variety
- Specificity

A few Tips for Improving your use of Connotation

- Avoid vague or general terms. When proofreading, identify and replace them with more specific words.
- Use “sensory” words, words that invoke one or more of the senses.
- Choose “descriptive” verbs and avoid using forms of the verb “to be” when possible (for example: instead of “she walked,” consider “she—shuffled, strolled, marched, etc.)

